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ABSTRACT

The selection and use of authentic reading materials for Spanish instruction of graduate-level international management students is described. Focus is on materials used in the second and third semesters of a 3-semester language course designed to foster communication skills. In the early part of the second semester, students present oral reports on assigned, non-authentic reading. They are then assigned a magazine article, an authentic text from a publication common in Latin America. At this stage, it is found that student reading problems are most often linked to decoding issues or lack of background knowledge, and that reading techniques based on schema theory are most useful in teaching reading skills. Articles relating to business or Latin American culture and politics are selected. In the third semester, one-page articles on Latin American politics and economics from another magazine are assigned for reading. Students at this stage often request readings with more general cultural content, but the magazine also contains practical articles on business. Student response to five articles is analyzed briefly. Lesson plans, developed similarly at both levels, generally include specific reading objectives and pre- and post-reading activities. Pre-reading activities are used less at the higher instruction level. (MSE)

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# The Use of Authentic Reading Materials in the Business Language Classroom

This paper describes the use of authentic reading materials for graduate students in business, in a curriculum which includes a foreign language as one of the areas of study. Concepts oased on the reading schema theory are used in this paper as pedagogical principles that support classroom activities. The schema theories and all their subsequent derivations have created, as Kenneth Goodman has rightly suggested, a "model of the reading process . . . to explain and predict reading behavior " . The purpose of the scholarship devoted to the process of reading has centered on discovering, if possible,"the effectiveness of reading instruction" (Goodman 11). Pedagogy in the area of how to teach reading in the foreign language classroom shares some of its fundamental theoretical approaches with the teaching of reading to the L1 student. The principle at the core of the reading scholarship based on the schema theory relates to the notion of "background information". It supports the view that the level of comprehension of reading material depends on the degree of familiarity the reader may have with the content material. Since reading is a receptive language process, effective transferring of information takes place if the reader deciphers (decodes) the message. In Kenneth Goodman's words, the process of reading "starts with a linguistic surface representation encoded by a writer and ends with meaning which the reader constructs" (12). Such a seemingly simple concept has been thoroughly studied and proven useful in its applicability in the foreign language classroom. The teaching of foreign

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languages traditionally has used the written text as the source of language instruction. The student reads -decodes and reconstructs- both orally and in writing, the information received through reading.

The Spanish business classes that we are reviewing for this paper use authentic readings as part of their teaching materials. To the greatest extent possible, we supply an adequate amount of background information to enhance the students' interaction with the text when they lack familiarity with the content. The levels we will examine are second and third semester Spanish in a three semester language track. The program's aim is the development of communicative skills in the target foreign language. Levels one and two meet five days a week for intensive language drills and structured and semi-structured conversations; some spontaneous conversation develops in the second level course. The students also meet two days a week for the grammar component of the course, taught in English. The third level meets four days a week. No formal accompanying grammar class is scheduled for this level, but specific grammar points are reviewed during one class period every other week.

**Authentic Texts**

As it is well known, the name "authentic" is reserved for textual material prepared for the consumption of native speakers, without any type of adaptation or abbreviation for the benefit of the foreign language student. Accordingly, the materials used in our program that fit this definition are the articles from two magazines that have Latin American circulation: Hombre Internacional and Visión. Such publications have an advantage over more nationally oriented magazines in that the students can read about a wider range of subjects that do not require a great deal of familiarity with specifically local matters.

**Reading at a Second Level Spanish Class**

During the first eight weeks of instruction, the students present oral reports on an assigned non-authentic reading. Through a structured conversation with a partner the students narrate the contents of the text. This activity is followed by a group discussion of the reading. During the second eight weeks of the semester the students are assigned a magazine article. The assigned readings are authentic texts chosen from Hombre Internacional. The students converse in pairs and the teacher monitors their progress and corrects mistakes. An open discussion may or may not follow depending on the time spent during group conversation. It is very common to find students that need training and guidance in developing reading skills in the FL, and also need a structured environment in order to perform in the FL once reading has been completed. We assume that the students are able to prepare the assigned material on their own (without the help of native speakers) to perform in class.

At the beginning levels, reading problems may involve skills that are either predominantly text-based--a matter of decoding--or knowledge based: the student can't make inferences because they lack the background knowledge. For example: the reading model the students use is linear. They don't necessarily interact with the text at each reading stage. They may arrive at the end of a reading without being aware of how the last stage connects with the early stages of the reading. The students cannot process all information at the same time while reading; that would represent an advanced reading skill, as the students at the third level generally possess. Occasionally the problem is not that students lack the appropriate schema, but rather they have not activated the appropriate schema. The reader

attempts to store pieces of information without any higher order relationship among them which leads to confusion and lack of comprehension of the reading material. A tendency toward a coherent organization of the material, (using correct grammar, new vocabulary, interpretative skills) is not always evident in the beginner; hence reading techniques based on schema theory become useful tools in order to achieve pedagogical goals.

**Choice of Articles**

Since the student population is exclusively graduate students in a professional business school, they are for the most part content driven. Topics chosen at this level deal with business in general (marketing, banking, finance), or Latin American questions of culture and politics. By the time students have been in class for eight weeks, the instructor can judge the level of linguistic difficulty appropriate for students. This has to be taken into account for the choice of articles. Usually at this level the readings range in difficulty from very short articles on very familiar topics, routinely accompanied by a picture, to a page-length text. For example, a short news item, called "Paraíso de coleccionistas", "A Collector's Paradise', is accompanied by the photograph of a vintage American car as it is being serviced by a mechanic in Cuba. The reading informs about the pre-1959 American cars that are still in use on the island. The teacher encourages the students to converse on the particulars of the photograph. The familiarity of the image -the old Chevy- provides the link between the student's prior experiences and the new information presented in the reading.

**The Lesson Plan**

The generic plan for the class activities based on readings of authentic texts follows similar strategies for both Spanish level two and level three. The following example may be

modified to fit the specific needs of a class.

I. Reading objectives

The student will demonstrate the ability to retrieve, edit and summarize information.

II. Pre-reading Activities:

a. identification of vocabulary through student paraphrasing and teacher modeling.

b. conversation about pictures, accompanying textual materials.

c. title discussion

III. Post-reading Activities:

a. conversations in pair and corrections.

B. retrieval through question and answer session by students;

c. assessment of retrieval through retelling of reading content, followed by written composition

The lesson plan for readings which have a lesser degree of difficulty may eliminate pre-reading activities such as discussion over title or pictures. Students may ask about specific vocabulary items and idiomatic expressions.

**Reading at a Third Level Spanish Class**

With respect to the criteria for choosing the articles to be assigned, the length and content have to be considered. Since all the activities related to the readings take up only one class period, the article cannot be excessively long. So the standard length is generally one page. As far as the subject is concerned, most of the articles from Visión chosen for this level, deal with Latin American politics and economics. But in spite of the fact that such subjects are inherently relevant to the discipline of the school, most teachers have had the

experience of a class requesting to read articles of a more general cultural content. This preference becomes evident during the second part of the semester of the third level, when one student is selected each week to choose an article for the whole class. As was mentioned before regarding schema theory, pedagogical research has shown that when students read a difficult foreign text they do not necessarily activate their background knowledge, in this case, economics, as a native speaker would. Reading then becomes quite a laborious process, particularly since these articles generally lack the narrative structure that would allow the students to use a familiar schema of discourse to help their comprehension. There are other features of a text and certain activities to be performed in class which can help the students understand.

Coming back to the magazine Visión, it also contains a section called "Ideas para su negocio", "Ideas for your business", which is different from the other articles in that they are more practically oriented. The other difference is that these pieces, which contain advice for the manager, sometimes show signs of being poor direct translations of an English text. Although this diminishes their authenticity, they are easier to understand and introduce some variation from the articles they usually read. Also, the pieces underline the known fact of how English dominates, directly or in translation, the discourse of the field of management.

Five of these authentic articles were assigned to a third level class during the first part of the semester, that is while they were still chosen by their instructor. Two of them were from the section "Ideas para su negocio"; they were "La gerencia visible" (Visión, No. 12, p. 41), The visible management; and "Desactive el sabotaje", Deactivate Sabotage (Visión No. 7, 41.) Two others were about the economic situation in Latin America: "América

Latina y el Fondo Monetario Internacional," Latin America and the IMF (Visión No.12, 36.), and "Síntomas de mejoría en Latinoamérica , Symptoms of improvement in Latin America (Visión, No.7, p.34). There was also an article on the flower industry in Colombia called "Las flores de mi jardín", The Flowers in my Garden. (Visión, No. 12, 38.)

The students, who had varying degrees of language competence, had already been exposed to authentic material on the second level where they read articles from Hombre. Since they were supposed to be able to reach a basic level of comprehension, very few pre-reading activities took place. These consisted mainly in comments on the titles of the articles the day that they were assigned. In the case of the most difficult pieces, some of the words were discussed at the beginning of the class.

The activities on the day devoted to the reading consisted of oral comments done in pairs, and a written composition on a subject determined by the teacher. An analysis of these written exercises, based mainly on the number of ideas remembered and on the use of inferences to make up for their failures in recall, shows the importance that the cohesiveness of a text has in the acquisition of schema.

This is seen in the case of the most difficult of all these articles, the one about the IMF. The level of the writing of the text was higher, with a great number of unknown words that had to be explained before the discussion. But at the same time, it was evident that the level of interest in the content was also high. When it came to answering the specific composition question, about half of the class managed to recall all the necessary ideas from the article, with an even distribution between the students with good linguistic abilities and those that had more problems.

The other article that showed a great number of ideas recalled was "La gerencia visible", which was completely at the other end of the spectrum as far as language difficulty is concerned and also in the degree of interest generated. The simplicity of the language was obviously the only reason that made the students remember so easily.

In all the other articles the number of ideas from the article that were actually remembered was low and the number of inferences was higher. They found it especially difficult to recall these ideas when the article had merely listed them, as for instance the symptoms of improvement in the economies of Latin American countries and the different aspects of the flower industry in Colombia. But one of the most interesting findings is that some of the ideas they had discussed in the article on the IMF appeared again in other articles to fill the gaps left by their failure to recall exactly what they had read. They were not absurd ideas but they were not in the text they read. Since the type of composition they were writing allowed for comment on the material, their grade was not affected by this. It is obvious that the article that was best written as far as the cohesiveness of the ideas is concerned, and that generated the most interest and had demanded the most preparation, had created schema that the students were applying to other readings.

Linguistically, although the students committed a great number of mistakes, they fulfilled the basic objective of acquiring enough elements to express themselves. Moreover, some of the expressions from the articles appeared in other activities, such as the adaptation of a dialogue on Latin America from their text book. So this is how we deal with these readings at the third level.

## CLOSING REMARKS

Successful reading takes place when the students complete and perform well in a sequence of activities that lead them to "create" meaning as a consequence of their interaction with the text. "[1] The authors conclude that the use of authentic texts has obvious advantages when teaching more mature, content driven students. The degree of interest this material generates motivates the students in spite of the difficulties of the language. Nevertheless, this activity must be carried out with concrete tasks that the student must perform, clear objectives for these tasks and immediate assessment of the results.

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[1] Rosenblatt (1978), Widdowson (1979), and others have argued persuasively that successful reading is an act of creation: the reader *creates* meaning through the interaction with a text. In this view, the meaning of a text does not reside in a fixed, static form frozen within the words on the page. Rather, it emerges anew in each encounter of a reader with a text. A text, then, does not contain meaning, which readers, both native and non-native, will realize in varying degrees. This ability to create meaning (what is usually referred to as comprehension) depends critically on, and in fact may be said to presuppose, another kind of interaction-that of various types of information the reader brings to the reading task and information available in the text itself (Devine, 260)."

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